



LOOKING OVER THE ROOFS OF NEW MEXICAN PUEBLO.

Christmas in the Pueblos of the Aborigines

By H. G. TINSLEY

THE spirit of good will and festivity that characterizes millions of homes at this season is as much in evidence in the aboriginal pueblos in the Southwest as elsewhere. It is true that there is a wide difference between the customs and observances of Christmas in cities of the palefaces and in the quaint old towns of the American Indians. The Indians know nothing of Kriss Kringle and his pack of reindeer; they have no Christmas carols, no gifts of dolls and dressing gowns and fancy sewing baskets as are found in all well-regulated houses of white people. Lo and his family never tasted plum pudding or cranberry sauce,

nor knew the delights of mince pie, and no black-eyed child of Lo ever saw a Christmas tree and shouted with joy at a fat, furry Santa Claus appearing mysteriously on the scene to distribute candy and toys. But, just the same, in their own way, the Pueblo Indians have Christmas delights not unworthy of communities which have lived in the sunshine of a waxing civilization for long centuries.

The supreme idea among the red people in the pueblos is to forget grudges, be happy, and to have a feeling of fellowship for all mankind—and what more lovely idea may possess anyone? The Pueblo Indians have taken kindly to the teaching of the missionaries, who have been among them for more than 200 years. In some respects their abandonment of the pagan customs has spoken touchingly of their fidelity to the new religious belief. They observe a catalog of saints days in the church calendar, several with general demonstrations. But to them no day in the whole year compares with the glory of Christmas. Easter comes nearest.

The principal Indian pueblos in the territories are Laguna, San Juan and Isleta. There are a half-dozen others in New Mexico, but none has quite such unique phases of life or so intelligent a population as these mentioned. Laguna is the largest and oldest pueblo in Central New Mexico. It was seen by Coronado when he and his army marched to conquest in 1540. Its people have customs centuries old, and they live in stone houses—terraced, squat and crude affairs—that date back more than 200 years. The town is situated on the Santa Fe Railroad, about seventy miles west of Albuquerque, and is one of the picturesque points that eastern tourists watch to see. The Indians in Laguna are an agricultural race, and their zealous labors in their little grain fields among the foothills, and in their

melon patches, and their industry among their flocks of sheep and goats awry popular notions concerning the perennial laziness of all Indian bucks.

The approach of Christmas is noted in Laguna weeks ahead. Everyone in the old aboriginal pueblo is alive to the importance of the season with what the Indians think is the very best kind of gaiety. The flocks are driven in from the mesa, the jerked beef is cut and hangs on lines everywhere drying in the warm sunshine, and the adobe granaries are overflowing with corn and beans. The women have ceased their weaving for the year.

The Indian boys now, after their long, hot summer season off among the sun-baked hills with the family goats and sheep, have an abundance of leisure, and may hunt for days at a time with the old household gun to seek a fat antelope, a brace of wild geese, and occasionally a mountain goat. Now the good housewives in the pueblo get ready for a grand season of baking and stewing preparatory to the whole week of feasting when the Christmas holiday comes. Brown bread is baked by scores of loaves, jars innumerable are filled with jam made from berries from the canyons, and the juiciest haunches of mountain goat or antelope (products of little Lo's prowess as a sportsman) are put away to dry, and be ready for roasting, on the last days before the holiday season arrives. The more thoughtful housewives in the pueblo provide bountifully with olla, a red drink made from zinfandel grapes, and a concoction of tizwin, or fermented juice of the cactus. Two days before Christmas the cedar chests in each home of the aristocratic Indians are opened and all the finery that the family has owned for generations is pompously brought forth. It is a memorable occasion in every home, and the black-eyed children stand about with open-eyed wonder. There are sprawling hats, trimmed with tinsel for children, bits of red and blue woollens for girls, dozens of beaded moccasins of several colors, necklaces of shells and agates, tortoise shell rattles, that are worn in the sacred dances, fancy buckskin leggings and black and red serapes for the women and gaudy sombreros and flaming sashes of wool for the men and youths. The last day of all before Christmas, the quaint little storehouses are swept, the baked and stewed provisions are set away in quantities enough for a small hotel, and all is ready for a week of merriment.

Christmas eve is ushered in amid a jangling of bells on the towers at the ancient adobe Franciscan mission church. Possibly a dozen shot guns may be fired in salute, and little Indian boys may cheer and yell. The aborigines know Christmas eve as *la Buena Noche*, and about all the events in the pueblo date from or before *la Buena Noche*. For untold generations it has been the custom to dance in the church on *la Buena Noche*. It is looked upon there as a pious duty to the Great Spirit. After the dance, mass, as prescribed by the church, takes place. Forty young men and women perform the dance. They are chosen by the chief of the pueblo, and no greater honor ever comes to anyone in Laguna than to be chosen for the

dance on *la Buena Noche*. The good old padre at Laguna has tried several times to persuade the aborigines to abandon the dancing in the church. He has argued that it is impious and not like the customs of others in the same faith. But it has all been in vain. The Indians decline to give up this custom which was observed by their fathers ages before the missionaries came among them. Moreover, they do not see why, if dancing on the mesa at the harvest season is pleasing to the pagan rain gods, dancing in the church on the eve of the anniversary of the birth of the Son is not pleasing also to the *Tata Deas* that the missionaries have taught them about.

When the discordant bells are rung in the church tower on Christmas eve, every human being in Laguna who moves a step goes quickly to the church. It would be hard to find a stranger and more picturesque grouping of human beings. From the altar rail to the church doors the floor is crowded. A few curious Americans have come from the cattle ranches miles away; a sprinkle of cowboys are there in buckskin suits and great heavy boots from which monstrous spurs clank, and besides, a few Navajo Indians with cheeks streaked with vermilion and blue, raven hair down their backs and with gaudy serapes of wool across their big square shoulders. Not a word is spoken while the assemblage gathers; the faces of all but the children are impossibly stolid.

An old man with flowing white hair rises, and in the native language orders a space made down the center of the church for the ceremonies. Several young bucks force the spectators back and out of the building to make room, and the orchestra and singers start up. There is a hoarse drum made of dry sheepskin stretched over a half barrel. A squaw beats that. Four young men have stringed affairs made of mesquite wood, similar to very crude violins. These are scraped back and forth in the sole effort to make a noise in time with the drum beats. When a space ten feet wide has been forced by the officious and gesticulating bucks, at a signal the dancers come trooping from outdoors into the open space. That is always a grave moment. No bridal party was ever stared at and envied more than those twenty young bucks and twenty squaws all gorgeously decked for this occasion.

The men are bare to the waist, their chests and backs painted in a half-dozen startling colors; huge bracelets of silver and brass encircle the upper arms, their heavy shocks of hair hang to the shoulders, and their faces are a ghastly white. At the waist they wear embroidered kilts of red; yellowish leggings (calzoncillos) are fastened about their calves and beaded moccasins—generally the heirloom of the family for generations—are worn on their feet. Behind each kilt dangles the skin of a wildcat or a fox. Some of these decorations have been used in such dances for fully a century, a few for

longer periods. Each male dancer holds a sacred gourd filled with pebbles, like a rattle, in one hand and a bunch of long eagle feathers in the other.

The dressing of the women dancers is more gaudy and generous. Each wears a bright red or blue over-gown (the manta) from her shoulders to her knees. It is the product of weeks of labor and planning, with all its variegated embroidery. From the knees down



Pueblo girl in front of her parental home at Laguna, New Mexico.



Typical of the Indian groups.

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